

January 15, 2003: Commission to Visit Russia to Examine Threats to Religious Freedom

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, will make an official visit to Russia January 17-25 to examine threats to religious freedom there. The Commission is also seeking to visit Belarus. As outlined in a January 14 letter to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, the Commission's concern has been heightened by a recent draft report by Russian officials that identifies a variety of religions, including the Roman Catholic Church, Protestants, and Muslims as threats to Russian national security. The Commission has received reports of measures directed against Roman Catholic religious leaders, restrictions on new and minority religious movements, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, recurrent anti-Semitic incidents, and the equation of Islam with terrorism. The Commission wrote to Secretary Powell, urging U.S. efforts to forestall steps that would set back religious freedom there. "Because of Russia's influence in the region, negative changes in Russian policy on religion may have a detrimental effect for the respect for religious freedom in other countries as well," Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer stated in the letter (text follows). Dear Mr. Secretary, The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to raise concerns about religious freedom in Russia as part of your ongoing discussions with Russian officials. Our concern has been heightened by a recent draft report by 35 Russian officials that identifies a variety of religions, including the Roman Catholic Church, as threats to Russian national security. While the findings of this draft report have not yet been finalized by the Russian government, the fact that senior Russian officials are contemplating policies based on these findings poses a potential threat to religious freedom that we believe should be discouraged at an early stage. Further, it reflects a disturbing trend in Russia that includes the exclusion of representatives of the Catholic Church, restrictions on the rights of new and minority religious movements, recurrent anti-Semitic incidents, as well as the equation of Islam with terrorism. As the draft report is expected to be considered by Russian officials in the near future, the United States has an opportunity to act in a timely manner to forestall steps that would be a further setback to promoting respect for religious freedom in Russia. Moreover, because of Russia's influence in the region, negative changes in Russian policy on religion may have a detrimental effect for the respect for religious freedom in other countries as well. The Commission believes, therefore, that this is an appropriate and important moment to raise the concerns associated with the draft report. The Commission is sufficiently concerned about the developments that we are dispatching in January a team of Commissioners to visit Moscow and meet with relevant secular and religious personnel, including government officials. It is our aim, with this visit, to signal how seriously these recent problems are being taken by the Commission, as well as to show support for religious communities in Russia, as we conduct further research into the dimensions of the current situation. We are grateful to you and the Department's officials for assistance in undertaking this visit. In our view, it would be of additional help to our efforts - and to the situation of religious freedom in Russia - if American officials also independently conveyed the concerns outlined in this letter. The draft report on religious extremism, authored by Russia's Minister of Nationalities Policy, Vladimir Zorin, and its top Chechen official, Akhmad Kadyrov, and 33 other officials, will be presented to, among others, the Russian Security Council. Ominously, the report identifies the Catholic Church, Protestants, so-called "cults," including long-established religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Islamic fundamentalism as primary threats to Russian national security. Such broadly-defined branding of religious groups as security threats can create an atmosphere of intolerance. In addition, the draft report recommends the creation of administrative structures and legal requirements to combat religious extremism, among them, a new federal ministry for church-state relations. These recommendations harken back to the Soviet era of repressive bureaucratic oversight and interference with religious communities. They threaten to undercut the progress that Russia has made in protecting religious freedom since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Commission notes that since the draft report became public, Minister Zorin and others have made statements downplaying its importance. However, there have, as yet, been no clear statements that the Russian government has stopped preparation of, or that it will not consider, the draft report. Therefore it is still a matter of serious concern. Unfortunately, the draft report also reflects several ongoing problems regarding respect for religious freedom in Russia. For example, over the last year, numerous representatives of both Protestant and Catholic churches, including a Catholic Bishop, have been expelled from, or denied entry to, Russia. There has been no adequate explanation from the Russian government for these incidents. Several religious groups still face unjustified obstacles to meet requirements set out in Russian law so that they can be registered with the government. In addition, despite encouraging statements by Russian President Putin decrying anti-Semitism, discrimination and violence continues against Jews in Russia. The Commission therefore recommends that the United States express its concern, at the highest levels of the Russian government, that if the views articulated in the draft report were adopted as Russian policy, they would pose a threat to religious freedom in Russia. At a time when U.S.-Russian relations continue to grow on a variety of levels, the U.S. government should continue to impress upon Russia the importance of meeting its international obligations to respect human rights,

including religious freedom. Upon our return from Russia, we hope to have the opportunity to brief you on our findings. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer Chair

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

- Dean Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director